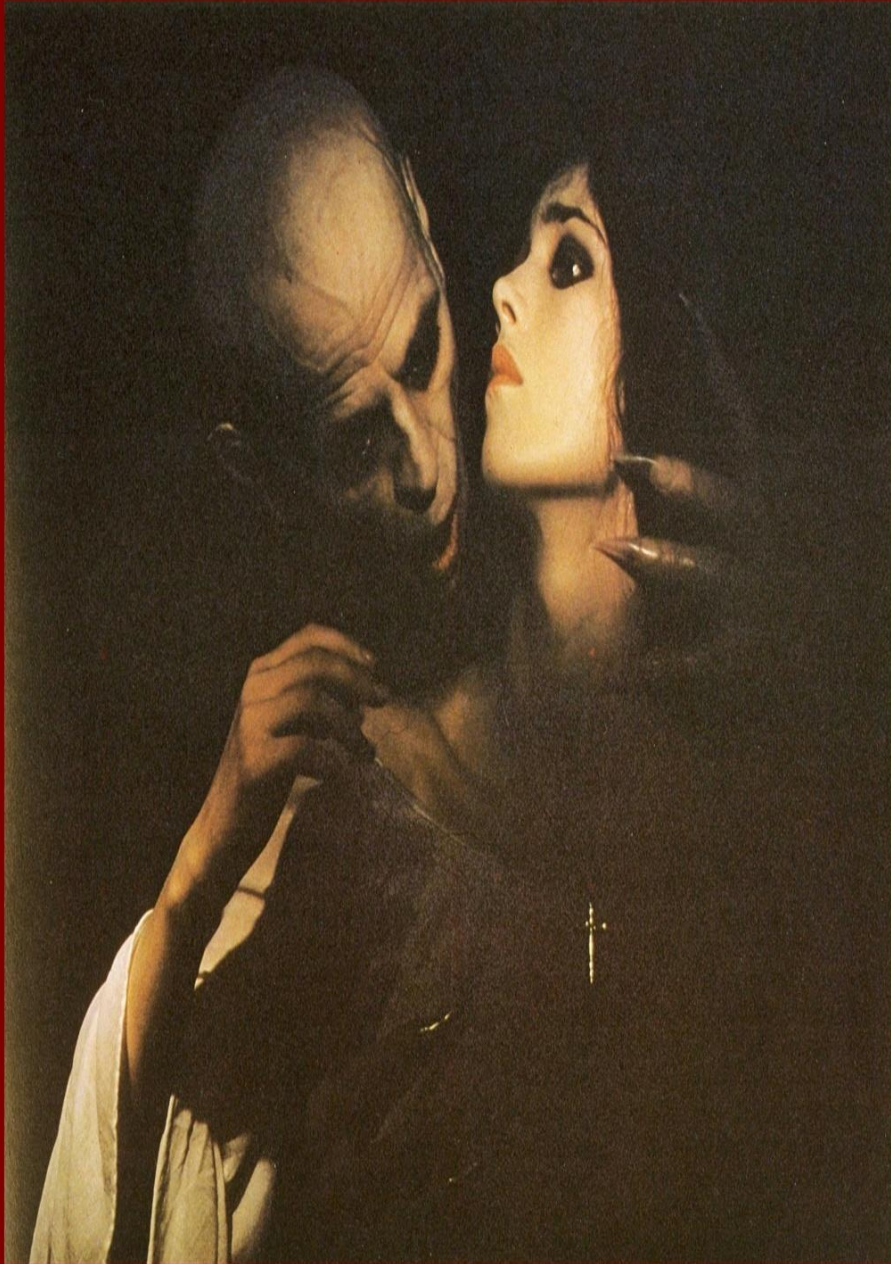


COST-FREE NOVELLA:



***BLOOD OF THE DAMNED AKA SHADOWS OVER RIGA:
THE NOSFERATU EXPERIMENT***

BROOD OF THE DAMNED – SHADOWS OVER RIGA – THE NOSFERATU EXPERIMENT

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Latvian Proverb: “Skopais maksā divreiz.” Translation: “The stingy one pays twice.”

This proverb warns against being overly frugal or cheap, as it often leads to higher costs in the long run.

Chapter 1: The Risky Summons

The forest smells like rot and iron. Autumn in Latvia holds both the decay of leaves turning to mulch and the metallic ghost of blood. Not hers, she thinks. Not yet.

The footsteps behind her have not stopped for six kilometers. Or maybe twelve. Time collapses when you run.

Her name is Elina. She knows this. She was born in Riga, thirty-four years ago, because her mother called her by that name once before dying. After all, the invitation three weeks ago was addressed to her specifically. She knows this is the way just as she knows her own face, intuitively, without immediate conviction.

Right now, she is simply jogging through the forest at the edge of her endurance, lungs pulling air that tastes like copper and pine resin, consciousness fractured between present terror and the incomprehensible past seventy-two hours.

The invitation came on heavy cream paper. Hand-addressed. Her name in careful calligraphy that suggested a woman, she'd thought, had taken time over each letter. The text was brief. Elegant. Impossible to refuse.

Your presence is requested for a gathering of significant consequence. October 21st through October 23rd. Suduva Manor, outside Riga. All arrangements provided. You have been selected because you understand something others do not.

There was no signature. No sender identification. The postmark and stamp seemed Latvian.

She had researched for three days. Suduva Manor was a pre-war mansion in rural territory between Riga and the coast, maintained by someone or some entity that preferred obscurity. Property records went back to the 1930s. The name appeared in old photographs. A nobleman's estate, beautiful in a precise, unromantic way. No recent history. No public presence.

She had called two friends. Both advised against it. One suggested it was a scam targeting naive professionals. The other suggested it was something worse, yet she didn't specify what. Elina had felt the pull anyway.

The certainty that you have been selected was not manipulation but recognition. Someone had chosen her. Someone knew her.

She had left Riga on the 20th of October. The drive took ninety minutes through a changing landscape, from urban sprawl to agricultural margin to forest. The autumn was advanced, the trees surrendering color with the exhaustion of those who had endured occupation. She had arrived at the manor gates as afternoon light turned metallic. Seventeen other people stood in the entrance courtyard. That was three days ago.

Now, branches whip her face; her left cheek blooms with pain where bark has cut the skin. She doesn't slow. Slowing is death. She knows this with absolute certainty, though she cannot articulate how she knows it. The knowledge lives in her muscles, in the animal panic that has overridden everything learned and civilized in her.

Behind her: Footsteps, voices, the occasional shout in a language that might be Latvian or might be Russian. Multiple pursuers. At least three. Maybe more. They are not trying to be quiet, which means they believe she cannot escape. They believe they will catch her. The forest will deliver her to them, or she will collapse, and they will simply walk up and take her.

She does not know this from experience. She has never been hunted before. She knows it from a place deeper than experience, from something inscribed in her genetics that predates her birth.

The thought arrives with such clarity that she stumbles.

A root, maybe. Or the thought itself, snagging her consciousness. She catches herself against a birch trunk, white bark rough against her palms, and pushes forward. The footsteps behind her pause. They have heard the disruption. They accelerate their pursuit.

Elina accelerates, too.

The mansion courtyard had smelled like rain and old stone. The woman who greeted them, the keeper, though no one called her that yet, had been precise. Elderly. Eastern European accent wrapped around careful English. She had known their names before they introduced themselves. Had mentioned personal details that seemed to suggest reconnaissance. She had fed them. Given them rooms. Let them mingle and grow confused about why they had been invited.

Twenty guests. Elina had counted. Tried to find patterns. What connected them?

Most were in their thirties or forties. Mixed nationalities, yet predominantly Eastern European: Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, and one who claimed Swedish and Russian heritage. One American. One British. One with an accent Elina couldn't place.

All of them had arrived as individuals, though in the mansion they had begun to recognize something in each other. A family resemblance that couldn't quite be articulated. Similar bone structure. Similar height. Similar nervous tics.

The second evening, the woman who introduced herself as Magdalena had noticed it too. "We vaguely look alike," she had said. Not a question. Observation. "At least some of us. It's uncanny."

That was when the windows had exploded inward.

The glass had not just broken, it had shattered with the violence of deliberate destruction. Gunfire, she realized, though the sound was strange, dampened by the mansion's stone walls. People screaming. The keeper standing in the doorway between the dining room and the hall, completely still, as if she had expected exactly this. As if the breach was scheduled.

Elina had run. She doesn't remember the decision to run, only the recognition that stopping meant death. She had moved toward the rear of the house, toward the kitchen, and from there toward the service entrance. She had heard more gunfire behind her.

She had heard screaming from two of the men and one of the women. She had heard Magdalena's voice crying something in Polish.

She had not stopped to check if anyone else was escaping.

The forest has begun to change. The trees are closer together, denser. The light failing, it's late afternoon now, or later. She has been running for perhaps two hours. Her legs have moved beyond pain into a numb, mechanical execution of muscle memory.

Her breath comes in ragged pulls. Her vision is tunneling, the periphery darkening, consciousness narrowing to immediate obstacles. This is shocking, she thinks distantly. This is what dying feels like from the inside.

She forces her consciousness to expand. To look for landmarks. To assess the possibility.

To her right: the forest continues. To her left, she glimpses the edge of a road. Asphalt. The thin strip of civilization cutting through the forest. She does not know, if it is the road she arrived on, or a different road, or a service road leading somewhere else. She does not know where she is anymore.

But roads lead to places. Places lead to towns. Towns might lead to safety.

She veers left.

The transition from forest to roadside happens suddenly. She stumbles down a slight embankment and comes out onto the asphalt, breathing hard. The road is empty in both directions. The afternoon light casts everything in amber and shadow. She looks back toward the forest.

The figures are visible between the trees. Three, she counts. Dark clothing. At least one is carrying something that might be a rifle. They move with the precision of practiced hunters.

She turns left and runs. The road is newer than the forest around it, and the asphalt is surprisingly well-maintained. She runs for three minutes, maybe five times, still unreliable, before she sees the vehicle. A truck, parked on the shoulder, is facing away from Riga. Its engine is running. The driver's door is open. Someone is moving near the cab. She does not slow down.

The person in the truck looks up, sees her, and makes a decision. It's a woman. Older. Latvian from the look of her. She seems to be debating between running and confronting.

"Help," Elina gasps. The word tears out of her throat raw. "Please. Help!"

The woman looks back toward the forest. The pursuers have emerged onto the road. They are still fifty meters away, but they are visible now. They are carrying weapons. They are moving toward both, Elina and the woman with the truck.

The woman makes a decision. She moves to the truck, climbs into the cab, and reaches across to open the passenger door.

"Get in. Now."

Elina gets in. The woman accelerates before the door has fully closed. The truck lurches forward, tires gripping asphalt. In the side mirror, Elina watches the three figures recede.

They are shouting, but the truck's engine drowns the sound. One raises the rifle. There is the crack of gunfire, and the rear window explodes.

The woman driving does not react. She accelerates harder. The truck reaches the outskirts of what might be a town, a collection of Soviet-era buildings and modern convenience stores. She drives directly through, not stopping, not slowing. Only when they have put distance between themselves and the forest does she finally speak.

"They were hunting you."

Not a question. Observation, like Magdalena's observation about resemblance.

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

Elina tries to think. What did she do? She attended a gathering. She was seduced by mystery. She spent seventy-two hours confused and terrified by the presence of strangers she didn't understand. And then she ran.

"I don't know," she says.

The woman driving nods, accepting this. She reaches across and closes the truck's passenger door, the one that has been hanging open, and drives in silence toward Riga. The sun descends toward the western horizon. The city lights appear gradually, then suddenly, and Elina realizes she is alive, though she doesn't yet understand what survival means.

Behind her, in the truck's mirror, the forest is already forgotten. Ahead, the city rises like a monument to the possibility of safety.

But in her muscles, in her blood, in the genetic code she hasn't yet learned to read, something surges. Something pursued by three armed figures continues fleeing. Something inherited insists there are more hunters coming, and Riga is not a sanctuary, but the next danger zone.

Chapter 2: The Invitation

The invitation arrived on a Tuesday in early October. For Lukas, it came by email to the personal address he'd used only for art commissions. He should not have received it. He had been careful. The address was private, used only for the three clients he permitted to contact him directly.

The subject line was blank. The body text was a single paragraph:

Your presence is requested for a gathering of significant consequence. October 21st through October 23rd. Suduva Manor, outside Riga. All arrangements provided. You have been selected because you understand blood differently than most. Bring nothing. Expect everything.

He had read it three times before deleting it. Then he had recovered it from his deleted folder. Then he had read it again. The phrasing was careful. Specific. It used language that suggested foreknowledge of him, not the public version of Lukas, the art restorer and conservator working for Riga's museums, but the private version. The version that understood blood.

He painted with it sometimes. Old animal blood, collected from butchers, was prepared and mixed with oils to create specific pigmentation. It was an archaic technique, used by Renaissance masters. The blood created depth that modern synthetic pigments couldn't achieve. It created presence. People who saw his work responded to it viscerally, usually without understanding why.

Only the clients who knew about the blood hired him repeatedly. The others sensed something wrong in his work. Dangerous. They preferred safer artists.

Lukas had stared at the email for a long time, then had made a decision that surprised himself: he accepted.

For Dārta, the invitation came as a physical letter delivered to her apartment in the suburbs of Riga. She was a translator, Latvian to English, English to German, occasionally Polish. The envelope was expensive, cream-colored, her name written in careful calligraphy.

She opened it in her kitchen, standing at the counter with morning coffee cooling in her hand. The text was brief. Elegant.

It mentioned nothing specific about her, but the tone suggested intimacy. The tone suggested recognition. She had been isolated for two years since her father's death, a long, angry illness in a Riga hospital, and then silence. She had continued working, continued existing, continued moving through the world with the mechanical precision of someone operating at minimum viable function.

The invitation arrived like a voice from outside her containment, suggesting that someone somewhere had noticed her silence and was offering a possibility. She called the number listed at the bottom of the invitation. A woman answered. Elderly. Accent Eastern European. She was expecting Dārta's call.

"Will you come?" the woman asked.

"I don't know you," Dārta said.

"Not yet," the woman agreed. "But you will recognize something when you arrive. The others will, too. You will not be alone."

Dārta accepted.

For Alexei, the invitation came from a contact who contacted him in person, in a bar in central Riga where he sometimes drank. The man was not one of Alexei's usual associates. He was precise, careful, and he seemed to know things about Alexei that Alexei had taken efforts to hide.

"There's a gathering," the man said. "Outside the city. Three days. It's for people like you."

"What do you mean, people like me?"

"People with unfinished business. People waiting for something without knowing what."

The man left a card. Suduva Manor. Dates. A confirmation request.

Alexei had not confirmed. He had continued his usual life. The construction job he performed for money that funded other activities, the contacts in the criminal underworld of Riga that provided meaning he couldn't articulate, the constant background sense that he was meant for something larger than he had achieved.

But he had kept the card.

On the morning of October 21st, he had packed a small bag and driven toward the address.

For Kata, the invitation was wordless. She arrived at the bus station in Riga, and a taxi was awaiting her; the driver held a sign with her name. She had not called a taxi. She had not arranged transportation. But her daughter in London had called three days earlier with unusual urgency.

"There's a gathering," her daughter had said. "Outside Riga. October 21st. You need to go."

"How do you know about this?"

"I just do. I woke up thinking about it. I keep dreaming about a place. A manor. It's important, Mum. You have to go."

Kata had not believed in her daughter's dreams. But her daughter had never been wrong about intuitive knowledge before. So Kata journeyed from London to Riga's bus stop, arrived at the station, and found the taxi waiting with her name, and moved toward the vehicle like someone following a script she had never read, still somehow knew by heart.

There were twenty of them. They arrived in separate transports, at different times, from different places. They came from Poland, Lithuania, Sweden, and Latvia. One came from London. One from Berlin. One from Dublin. One from New York.

They did not know each other. But they recognized something in each other's faces immediately.

It was not obvious. It was not something they could articulate. But when Elina arrived and saw Lukas in the entrance courtyard of the mansion, she felt a strange pull. Not attraction. Recognition. The sense that they shared something. Genetic, maybe. Or spiritual. Something that lived deeper than conscious knowledge.

The keeper greeted each arrival with the same procedure. She knew their names. She knew some of them had come from a great distance. She knew, somehow, that they had accepted the invitation almost against their will—that accepting had felt inevitable, even for those who had initially resisted.

"Welcome," she said to each arrival. "You have been cautiously selected. There are nineteen others like you, and by tomorrow, you will understand why. For now, please settle in. There is food. There are rooms. There is time enough for the revelation."

What revelation? They asked each other in whispers, in the corridors, in the library where they gathered to try to understand their shared circumstance.

Magdalena, from Warsaw, was the first to articulate it. "We look alike," she said, gathering several of them together in the evening of the first day. "Look at us. We share features. Height. Bone structure. Something in the eyes. How is that possible, if we're strangers?"

"Chance, for I will not accept any Nazi experiment sermon!" offered Thomas, from Dublin. He was a professor of history, accustomed to rational explanations. "Physical similarity is statistically inevitable across any sufficiently large population."

"Twenty people from across all of Europe don't randomly assemble with identical features," Magdalena said. "This is not a chance. This is design."

They looked at each other. She was right. It was impossible to deny once it had been articulated. They were similar in ways that could not be explained as a random occurrence. Similar enough that they could have been distant cousins. Similar enough that if they'd been arranged in a photograph, they would have looked like members of a specific family.

By the second evening, they were discussing genealogy. By the night of the second day, they were beginning to articulate a question that none of them had the answer to:

What bloodline connects us?

And then the windows exploded inward.

Chapter 3: Before

Occupation Record, Archives of the Latvian Institute of History, dated October 1941:

The nobleman identified as Leonid Suduva (birth records indicate 1898, location: Suduva Manor) has been flagged for requisition of properties and assets. Initial reports suggest voluntary cooperation with the provisional Soviet administration. His primary residence, Suduva Manor, remains his own through the arrangement of local administration. Recommend continued monitoring for potential counter-revolutionary activity.

Testimony of Ilga Gruntaine, recorded 1995:

My mother was fourteen when the soldiers came. She was not born in Latvia; she was born in Poland, and her family had moved to Riga in 1930 seeking work. When the Russians came, everything was chaos. People were being deported. The border was closing. My mother's family tried to flee, but there was no route. They were trapped in Riga.

She was taken to Suduva Manor in the winter of 1941. She was not the only one. There were others: Polish girls, Latvian girls, Russian girls whose families had fled from other territories. He chose us. The nobleman, Suduva. We never understood why. Maybe because we were foreign, unprotected. Maybe because he could.

My mother was pregnant within a month. She was fourteen. She had not understood what would happen. No one prepared her for it. When she realized, she tried to kill herself. She cut her wrists with glass from the manor kitchen. The servants found her. They stopped the bleeding. She carried the pregnancy to term.

I was born in 1942. My mother lived until 1985, but she never spoke about the pregnancy. Never spoke about the manor. Never spoke about the man. I learned to ask questions slowly, carefully, in ways she could answer without fully acknowledging the truth.

He disappeared in 1943. The official records say he was arrested by Soviet authorities. The unofficial stories, the ones the women told each other in whispers, said something else. They said he transformed.

They said he became something else. They said that the blood of all the girls he had used created something, and what it created was not human anymore.

My mother knew I was born from violence. But she also knew I was born from something else. Something she could never quite specify. She said sometimes I smelled wrong. Not bad. Wrong. Like I was part wolf, part bird, part something that did not have a name in human language.

I never understood what she meant. I understood it only when I was older and began to recognize the thing in myself that she had sensed. The thing that could smell blood from miles away. The thing that could be seen in the darkness. The thing that made other people uncomfortable in ways they dared not articulate.

The thing I inherited from him.

Birth Records, Suduva Manor Archives, 1941-1943:

Marija Kalnins, born March 1942. Mother: Anna Kalnins (age 14). Father: noted as "nobleman, local proprietor." Birth weight: 4.2 kg. Observations: unusual pigmentation in eyes (golden); unusual olfactory sensitivity (noted by attending physician as "perhaps mythological").

Dace Volks, born May 1942. Mother: Kristine Volks (age 16). Father: noted as "noble patron." Birth weight: 4.1 kg. Observations: infant exhibits unusual strength; abnormal response to sunlight (excessive photosensitivity).

Aleksandr Petrovich (no surname recorded), born August 1942. Mother: unknown, listed only as "T" (records incomplete). Father: "Lord S-" (records deliberately obscured). Birth weight: 4.3 kg. Observations: delivered during night hours. Mother did not survive delivery. Cause: "excessive hemorrhage, unusual coagulation patterns."

(And others. Several more entries. Each birth was dated between March 1942 and December 1943. Each mother is between fourteen and twenty-three years old. Each entry notes observations of unusual physical characteristics, olfactory sensitivity, muscular development, pigmentation anomalies, and responses to light.)

Genealogical Chart, compiled by Archive Keeper, circa 1980-2024:

First Generation (1942-1943): 10 documented births from impregnation at Suduva Manor. Only 7 reached adulthood. (Three died in infancy or early childhood; cause of death listed variously as infection, respiratory failure, sudden unexplained cardiac arrest. Unusual for the period; suggests possible genetic vulnerability to sunlight or a supernatural toll of the inherited bloodline.)

Second Generation (1960s-1970s): 12 documented births from first-generation parents. All reached adulthood. All exhibit similar physical characteristics: unusual eye pigmentation, heightened sensory acuity, and documented cases of increased strength or agility beyond normal human capacity. All reported experiences of shared dreams or inherited memories (documented in testimony taken by the previous archive keeper).

Third Generation (1985-2000): 18 documented births. All reached adulthood. All exhibit characteristics of the second generation. Additionally, all reported experiences of being drawn toward specific geographic locations (Riga, Latvia, the vicinity of Suduva Manor) were without conscious understanding of why.

Fourth Generation (2000-2010): 20 individuals, born across Europe, to parents of second or third generation. These are the survivors of the current gathering. They were invited to Suduva Manor in October 2024 because they represent the generation most likely to understand and accept their genealogical inheritance.

Letter, dated September 2024, written by Archive Keeper to her predecessor:

Dear Agnese,

by now, you have been gone for five years. I am writing you even though letters cannot reach you, because I need to articulate what I am about to do.

I am going to summon them. The fourth generation. The ones born to parents who understood, who knew what they carried, who tried to hide it but could never fully escape it. The ones born to families scattered across Europe, trying to distance themselves from Latvia and from the legacy of occupation and transformation.

I am going to bring them back to Suduva Manor. I am going to show them what they are.

You would tell me I am cruel. You would tell me that knowledge burdens and that some people are better served by remaining ignorant. You were always cautious. You spent forty years maintaining this archive and never once suggested we contact the bloodline survivors. You said the knowledge was too dangerous. The people who carried it were not ready.

But you are gone. And I am old. I have spent twenty years maintaining the archive, and I have come to believe that knowledge, however dangerous, is necessary.

That the bloodline will persist regardless of whether we acknowledge it.
That the descendants of Leonid Suduva will carry his inheritance in their blood, whether they understand it or not.

Better that they understand than remain ignorant of their own capacity.

Better they come to Suduva Manor and read the records and hear the testimony and accept what they are than to spend their lives feeling drawn to something they cannot name.

I am seventy-three. You were ninety-two when you died. I do not know, if I will survive to see the consequences of what I am about to do. But I can no longer bear the silence. I can no longer bear watching the bloodline descendants move through the world, haunted by the inheritance they do not acknowledge.

I will summon them. I will reveal. And if revelation brings danger, well. Danger is the inheritance, too.

I hope you forgive me.

Yours in archive and remembrance, Daina

Scientific Documentation, DNA Analysis, conducted 2000–2024 by private research organization (identity obscured, likely university-affiliated or privately funded):

Subject Pool: 87 individuals, all documented as genetic descendants of Leonid Suduva (direct line, through various mothers and subsequent generations).

Key Findings:

1. Genetic Marker Consistency: All 87 subjects share specific genetic markers that appear in no other known human population. The marker appears to be dormant, expressed only at low levels in the first and second generation, but increasingly expressed (activated) in the third and fourth generation.

2. Marker Function: Unknown. The marker does not correspond to any known protein-coding sequence. Its function may be epigenetic, regulatory, or may indicate dormant capability not yet fully manifested in living subjects.

3. Phenotypic Expression: All subjects report heightened sensory acuity (smell, night vision, proprioception). Many report experiences of inherited memory or shared dreams. Several subjects report histories of unusual strength or agility development in adolescence or young adulthood.

4. Speculative Hypothesis: The genetic marker may represent vestigial vampire genetics, inherited from Leonid Suduva at his transformation. If the transformation was biological rather than purely supernatural, the genetic material would persist in descendants. Expression in later generations might indicate gradual activation of dormant capabilities.

Note: This hypothesis is not scientific. It is included only to note that multiple investigators have independently proposed supernatural mechanisms to explain the genetic data. The rational explanation is that the genetic marker represents some unknown but mundane human variation equally unsupported by available data.

Conclusion: Further investigation required. Recommend contact with fourth-generation subjects for participation in a longitudinal study.

Photograph, dated 1938, found in Suduva Manor archives:

A man stands in the courtyard of the manor. He is perhaps forty years old. His face is not remarkably thin, with high cheekbones and pale eyes. He wears formal clothing appropriate to his era. Behind him, the manor is clearly visible, beautiful in its pre-war architecture.

On the back of the photograph, a date: "1938. L.S., before."

There is a second photograph, dated 1943. It is unclear. The image has been deliberately defaced or damaged, as if the photograph's subject was erased. Only the courtyard is visible clearly. The figure that might be a man is blurred, obscured, almost obliterated.

On the back: "1943. L.S., after. Do not look directly."

Chapter 4: The Arrival

The gate to Suduva Manor was open when Elina arrived. She had taken the train from Riga to the small town of Sigulda, then a taxi for the final kilometers into the forest. The landscape had changed gradually as she'd driven from suburban margins to agricultural land to forest so dense that the road seemed to tunnel through it.

The manor appeared without warning. One moment was forest, the next moment was clearing, and there it was: a pre-war structure built in an architectural style that suggested Swedish and Latvian influences. Stone. Multiple stories. Shuttered windows. Gardens that had been carefully tended before being allowed to grow somewhat wild.

Beautiful. Unsettling. The kind of place that held history you could feel but not articulate.

Two other arrivals were standing in the courtyard when she pulled up. A woman from Poland, Magdalena, who would introduce herself later, and a man with an accent that placed him somewhere in Eastern Europe. They looked at each other with the recognition of strangers thrust into the same inexplicable circumstance.

By evening, there were seventeen arrivals. By noon the next day, twenty.

The keeper greeted each one individually. She was elderly, possibly in her seventies, with white hair and careful movements that suggested age but also practiced precision. She was Latvian, or had been Latvian so long the language was her body's first language. She introduced herself as Daina, and she welcomed each guest with a warmth that seemed genuine and yet calculated.

"You have been selected carefully," she said to the group once everyone had assembled. "There are reasons you were invited. You will understand them before you leave. For now, I ask for your patience and your trust."

The guests had questions. Many questions. Daina answered some and deflected others. She confirmed that they had been invited for a specific reason. She confirmed that they had been selected from among many potential candidates. She did not confirm anything beyond that.

The manor provided comfort. The rooms were large, the beds substantial. There was good food-Latvian traditional dishes alongside more contemporary cuisine. The library was extensive. The common rooms were elegant in a way that suggested mid-century Flair.

It was the kind of place designed to make people feel that they had entered into something significant.

In the evening of the first day, the guests began to notice their own similarities.

Magdalena, from Warsaw, raised it first. She had gathered a small group in the library and pointed out the obvious: they looked alike. Not exactly alike, but remarkably similar. Similar height. Similar bone structure. Similar pigmentation. Similar to the way distant cousins might resemble each other.

"It's uncanny," Magdalena said. "Look at us. We could be a family."

Thomas, from Dublin, attempted rationality. "Statistically, across any large enough population."

"Twenty people from across all of Europe do not randomly assemble with identical genetic features," Magdalena interrupted. "This is design. This is intentional."

By the second evening, genealogy became the obsessive topic among the guests. They tried to find connections. Family trees. Shared ancestry. Some had Latvian heritage. Some were Polish. Some Swedish. But the further back they traced, the vaguer the records became.

And yet they all had some connection to Latvia. Latvian heritage, or parents who had been Latvian, or ancestors whose records suggested Latvian origins before World War II.

They began to ask Daina direct questions.

"Why are we here?"

"What connects us?"

"Are we related somehow?"

Daina smiled. "Patience," she said. "One more evening. By tomorrow afternoon, everything will be clear."

That night, Elina noticed something else. Several of the guests reported similar dreams. Fragments of inherited memory. Running through forests. The sense of being hunted. The smell of blood and autumn. Visions of places they had never been but somehow recognized.

"It's like genetic memory," one of the guests said, David, from New York, who worked in neuroscience. "As if memory lives in the genome and gets passed down as biological inheritance."

"That's not scientifically supported," Thomas said.

"Neither is most of this," Magdalena replied.

Elina did not sleep that night. She walked the halls of the manor, tracing its geometry. She noticed things she had not noticed on arrival. The artwork on the walls—some of it depicted violence. A hunt scene, rendered in oils, showing a figure that was half-human and half-something else. A portrait of a man that matched the photographs she would later find in the archive. A painting of women in a manor courtyard, their faces rendered with careful detail, their eyes containing some kind of knowledge or resignation.

In one of the hallways on the upper floor, she found a document framed behind glass:

Suduva Manor, Estate Records, 1938–1943. Proprietor: Leonid Suduva, Nobleman. Status of Estate: Maintained through Provisional Soviet Administration, 1941–1943. Current Status: Property of an archive and historical preservation organization.

Below this, in handwritten notation: The bloodline persists. The inheritance continues. Recognition is necessary.

She did not know what this meant. But it sent a shock of recognition through her, the sense that something in her genetic code understood perfectly, even if her conscious mind could not articulate it.

The following afternoon, the windows would explode inward. The keeper would stand in the doorway, completely unsurprised. The hunt would begin.

But in that moment, reading the framed document in the lamplight of the manor's upper hallway, Elina felt something shift in her. Some dormant thing, awakening. Some inherited knowledge, rising to consciousness.

The thing that her ancestors had been—the thing that Leonid Suduva had created through violation and impregnation—was living in her blood. And whether she understood it or not, it was calling.

Chapter 5: The Breach

The explosion of the windows was not a metaphor. Glass shattered inward with deliberate force, multiple impacts from multiple directions, as if coordinated. Elina, sitting in the library reading a text about Latvian history that Daina had placed strategically nearby, heard the sound first as a cracking, then as a roar, then as something her brain registered as gunfire.

People screamed. Movement erupted from stillness. The afternoon light that had been pouring through the windows was suddenly fragmented by the absence of glass, by dust rising from furniture impact, by the terrible clarity of violence made real.

Elina moved on pure instinct. She did not think. She ran toward the rear of the library, toward the kitchen corridor, the body executing movements she had not consciously planned. The scream of the woman named Katija came from the dining room. The sharp percussion of gunfire came from multiple entry points. Someone was shouting in Russian. Someone else in Latvian. Someone was ordering the attackers to find them, to separate them, to bring them to the front.

The keeper stood in the doorway. Daina. She was completely still, suspiciously composed. She looked at the chaos of the breached mansion with the expression of someone watching a scheduled event unfold precisely as planned. And in that moment, Elina understood with absolute clarity: Daina had done this. Daina had orchestrated this. The breach was not happening to them. It was orchestrated.

She did not process this fully. She only moved forward, through the kitchen, past the terrified cook who was trying to hide in the pantry, toward the service exit. The door was heavy, old wood, and for a moment, it resisted her pull. Then it opened onto the courtyard beyond.

The grounds were beautiful in the afternoon light. Gardens. Pathways. The forest edge was perhaps two hundred meters distant. Elina ran toward it.

Behind her: more gunfire. A man, one of the guests, she thought, shouting a name. The sound of the mansion's interior being destroyed or methodically searched. Footsteps on the gravel courtyard.

She reached the forest edge and did not hesitate. The trees received her like a mouth closing. Within seconds, the mansion was obscured. The chaos of the breach was replaced by the different chaos of forest branches, undergrowth, and the sudden darkness of terrain away from direct sunlight.

Elina ran. She did not know how long. Time became abstract. The forest was not like in video games; there were clearings, tangles, areas of dense growth, and areas of rocky terrain. Her consciousness fragmented into separate systems: one part calculating direction, one part managing her body's degradation, one part processing the shock of what had happened.

The invitation had been a trap. The gathering had been designed to bring them together, to assemble them, to make them vulnerable. The breach was not random violence. It was orchestrated. It was planned.

And somewhere in her genetics, in the inherited knowledge she carried in her cells, she had known this. Some part of her had recognized the danger and had run anyway, drawn by something deeper than conscious choice. Drawn by the bloodline's own momentum.

By the time evening began to fall, she had encountered other survivors. Not directly—she heard them moving through the forest at a distance. She heard someone crying. She heard footsteps that might have been another runner. She heard the sounds of pursuit.

She did not attempt to make contact. Survival instinct suggested that solitude was safer. But isolation in a hunted state was its own trauma, and by nightfall she was moving toward sounds, toward the possibility of other human presence.

She found Lukas in a clearing near what might have been an old cottage foundation. He was injured, blood down one side of his face from a head wound, but conscious and alert. His eyes, when he recognized her as another survivor, showed relief so profound it bordered on breaking.

"How many?" he asked.

"I don't know. I got out early. I didn't see" She couldn't finish the sentence. She didn't see who died. Who stayed. Who was burned, shot, or caught?

They moved together through the night, not speaking much, conserving energy. By morning, they encountered Dārta, the translator from Riga, moving through the same forest section, equally disoriented and equally alive.

By the second day, they had found Magdalena and Thomas. By the evening of the second day, they were aware of at least two other survivor groups moving through the forest. The count was nineteen at that point. Seventeen were confirmed dead or missing, likely dead. Many of the deaths had been sudden and horrific. Katija had been shot in the dining room, her body left where it fell. Two men had been caught in the courtyard and eliminated methodically. Others had simply vanished from the chaos, either escaped, captured, or killed.

Eleven dead. Nine survivors, scattered across the landscape, all moving toward Riga.

All were moving toward the mansion, though none of them consciously knew why.

Chapter 6: The Hunted Realize They're Hunted

The realization came gradually, accruing through observation and near-encounter.

On the third day, moving through the forest near what might have been an old Soviet-era facility, Elina and Lukas encountered evidence that they were not fleeing random violence but systematic elimination: Tire tracks too recent to be old, positioned as if blocking a potential escape route; abandoned food packaging consistent with contemporary military rations; evidence of a perimeter being methodically established.

On the fourth day, they crossed a road and discovered roadblocks. Temporary barriers constructed of materials too deliberate to be accidental, positioned at intervals that suggested a coordinated checkpoint strategy. Some were manned. Some were vacant.

By the fifth day, the reality had become impossible to deny: They were being hunted systematically. Not as scattered victims of chaotic violence, but as a coordinated elimination. Multiple distinct threat-sources. Different operational styles. Different weapons and tactics.

The first group they identified was mercenary in bearing and equipment. Professional, efficient, technologically coordinated. They moved with the precision of trained military operatives. They tracked methodically. They used radio communication and surveillance equipment. Their hunting was not personal; it was professional. Someone had hired them to eliminate the survivors, and they were executing the contract with the competence of specialists.

The second group became apparent through different evidence: Ritual objects left at locations where survivors had passed through, written symbols carved into trees, and the sound of chanting in the distance. They were cultists. Believers in something from a Latvian pre-Christian tradition, blood religion, or some distorted ideology that positioned the survivors as vessels of sacred significance. They hunted with the zeal of true believers. They pursued with the momentum of religious certainty.

The third group was something else entirely.

Magdalena encountered them first, in the forest on the fifth day. She had been moving alone, separated from the others, trying to reach Riga by a different route. She had been moving through a clearing when the transformation began.

She described it later, to the other survivors, with the careful precision of someone who had witnessed something impossible made real:

"I heard the sound first. Not a growl. A ripping sound. Like flesh-tearing. I thought it was, I don't know what I thought. And then he was there. The man. Not a man. It changed while I was watching. The bones shifted. The face lengthened. The skin seemed to disappear and then reappear as fur. It was impossible. It was real. It happened."

A werewolf. She had seen a werewolf. The impossible made flesh.

"Did it?" Thomas couldn't finish the sentence.

"I ran. I was faster than should be possible. I could feel my body doing things. Running faster than I've ever run. And it was behind me, and it was faster still, but something was wrong with it. It was like it recognized me. Like it was hunting, but also as if it was acknowledging something. Like it knew what I was."

The group gathered together as they moved toward Riga, driven by the collective understanding that isolation was less viable than unity. The three threat-sources continued. Mercenaries are closing in from the north. Cultists are establishing a perimeter from the east. And in the forests, the werewolves hunt with predatory efficiency but also with something like kinship.

By the time they reached Riga's outskirts, they had consolidated to nine survivors. They had moved through fear and exhaustion and the accumulating trauma of being hunted. They had begun to recognize each other not as strangers bound by circumstance, but as something closer to kin, not family, exactly, but members of a collective unit moving toward shared destiny.

And they had begun to articulate the question that had been implicit since Magdalena first pointed out their resemblance: What binds us together? What genealogy, what blood inheritance, what supernatural legacy had been sufficient to warrant this systematic elimination?

The answer, they sensed, waited in Riga. In the mansion, they kept moving toward without conscious decision. In the keeper who had orchestrated their gathering and then orchestrated their scattering.

Daina knew. The archive knew. The bloodline itself, living in their cells, in their genetics, in the inherited knowledge that lived deeper than consciousness, knew.

Chapter 7: The Pattern Emerges

It began with Lukas noticing that his night vision had improved dramatically over the five days of flight. Where previously he had needed lamplight to work on art restoration, now he could see in near-total darkness with perfect clarity. The shift had been gradual; he hadn't noticed it happening.

It was on the fifth day, moving through the forest at dusk, that he realized he was seeing colors in the darkness. Not just shadows. Actual chromatic information. The brown of tree bark. The green of the undergrowth. The distant silver of moonlight on water he couldn't yet reach.

He mentioned it to Dārta in a whispered conversation while the others slept.

"My senses are changing," he said. "My vision. My smell. It's like something is waking up."

Dārta, the translator, had also begun to notice patterns in her experience.

"Shared dreams," she said. "I've been having them. We all have, I think. I dream of a courtyard. I dream of a man's face. I dream of being pregnant, which makes no sense because I've never been pregnant. And the dreams are so specific. They're not my memories. They're someone else's memories. Genetic memory, maybe. Inherited something."

By the sixth day, when Magdalena and Thomas and the others began comparing notes, the pattern became undeniable:

They were changing.

Not visibly, not yet. But internally. Sensory acuity expanding. Physical capabilities are increasing. The smell of blood triggers responses in the nervous system that suggest predatory inheritance. The presence of other group members created a sense of cohesion that bordered on telepathic.

And they all had the same dreams. Or similar enough that the differences seemed like variations on a theme. A courtyard. A man. Occupation-era violence. Women are being forced into pregnancy. Birth. Inheritance. A thing that had been created in blood and suppressed history and occupation trauma, persisting in descendants eighty years later.

"We're related," Elina said. It was not a question. It was the articulation of what they had all sensed since the beginning but had been too terrified to fully acknowledge.

"More than related," Thomas replied. He was the intellectual among them, the one accustomed to assembling information into coherent narratives. "We share genetic material in a way that goes beyond normal familial inheritance. We have the same markers. The same physical characteristics. We're descended from the same source."

"What source?" one of the others asked a woman named Ieva, who had been an architect before the breach, whose family was Latvian, and whose ancestral records went back further than the others.

"A single individual," Thomas said slowly. "Someone who passed on genetic material to all of us. Someone with unusual characteristics that got expressed across multiple generations."

They did not say his name yet. They did not yet know it with certainty. But the genealogy was becoming visible. A man. A nobleman. Occupation-era Latvia. Women impregnated. Genetic inheritance passed down through multiple generations, now expressing in the fourth generation with startling clarity.

By the time they reached Riga's outskirts, the pattern had become impossible to ignore. They were not human in the standard sense. They carried something else. Something inherited. Something that made them prey to mercenaries, objects of cultist obsession, and as rabid as the werewolves hunting them.

They were descendants of something. Something that had been created in violation and transformed in darkness.

And Riga, and the mansion beyond it, held the documentation of their damnation or apotheosis. They did not yet know which.

Chapter 8: The Dark Streets of Riga

The city consumed them differently from how the forest had. Where the forest had been open space, requiring navigation through physical obstacles, Riga was compressed in density. Streets narrowed. Buildings created walls. The urban landscape was designed by humans for humans, and the survivors moved through it with the disorientation of beings evolved for different terrain.

They arrived in pieces, separate groups filtering into the city over twelve hours. Some took buses from smaller towns. Some walked directly through the outskirts. All of them converged eventually on central Riga, on the Old Town with its medieval architecture and accumulated history.

Elina, moving with Lukas and Dārta, found a small hostel in the university district. The owner was old, Latvian, with the careful courtesy of someone who did not ask questions about her guests' circumstances. She provided rooms. Hot water. The possibility of a shower and rest for the first time in days.

Yet full rest was impossible. The sensation of being hunted did not cease simply because they had entered the city. It manifested differently here. Mercenaries could not openly pursue them through urban streets, for there were police, civilians, and witnesses. But the threat was still present. They felt it repeatedly. They noticed surveillance measures that might have been real or might have been a paranoid stress reaction. They moved through the city, constantly aware that they were foreign in their own refuge.

The cultists were more visible. Elina saw them twice, small groups gathered in public spaces, watching. Waiting. They seemed to know where the survivors were, or at least to be searching methodically. They wore certain marks. Symbols. They moved with the coordinated purpose of organized religion.

And there were other presences, too. Strange individuals who smelled wrong. Who moved with uncanny coordination. The mercenaries, she realized, but also something else. Something that made her skin prickle with recognition of each threat.

On the second day in the city, Magdalena made contact with the larger survivor group. She had been moving through the central market when she recognized one of the others, Alexei, from Moscow, who had been at the original gathering. He was alive. Functional. Moving through the city with the careful paranoia of someone hunted.

"There are more," Magdalena reported when the groups reunited. "I found four others besides Alexei. Two in the train station. One in a church. The count is at least fourteen now, not nine."

But survival was fracturing. Not everyone could process what had happened and move forward with functional coordination. One of the survivors, a woman named Kristīne, had encountered a mercenary team directly and had been shot. She was alive, but barely. She was hiding in a basement apartment near the harbor, bleeding slowly from a wound in her abdomen.

They could not help her. They did not have the resources to get her medical attention without drawing attention to themselves. They could only acknowledge her presence and her sacrifice and move forward.

"There's only one sanctuary," one of the newer arrivals reported. "The manor. Several people have mentioned it. Dreams about it. It's where we're supposed to go."

Suduva Manor. The place they had fled from. The location of the original gathering and the treacherous breach.

"It's a trap," Thomas said immediately. "It has to be. We should go to the police. Report what happened. Get protection."

But they all knew he was wrong. The police would not help them. Even if they believed the story, which they wouldn't, the institutional response would be inadequate. They had experienced a breach orchestrated by at least three separate forces. A local police force would be overwhelmed. Potentially compromised.

They were on their own. Survival meant moving toward the one location they understood. The mansion. The archive. The keeper who had orchestrated everything.

The Riga gauntlet lasted six days. By the end, the survivors had consolidated to nine stable, functional, and moving with a united purpose. They had gathered supplies. They had moved through the city, learning its geography, using it as cover. They had felt the constant pressure of pursuit but had managed to evade direct confrontation.

And then they began moving outward, toward the forest, toward the mansion that called to them through genetic inheritance and dreams and the accumulated weight of suppressed history.

Chapter 9: The Three Threats Converge

The forest outside Riga was different from the forest of their flight. The survivors were moving toward a destination now, not away from a threat. They moved with purpose. They moved like predators, beginning to understand their own nature.

The mercenaries intercepted them on the seventh day. Not an ambush, but an encounter, calculated and precise. Three operatives, heavily armed, were blocking the road that led toward the mansion. Professional bearing. Efficient tactics.

"Stand down," one of them shouted. "You're coming with us."

The survivors stopped. For a moment, they were simply tired people facing armed professionals. And then something shifted. Elina felt it, a surge of power rising from her deepest self. Not fear. Confidence. The recognition that she was not only prey.

"Run," she said to the others.

But before anyone could move, the metamorphosis began.

It happened simultaneously to three of them, Lukas, Magdalena, and one of the newer arrivals whose name Elina had learned was Darius. Their bodies shifted. The transformation was agonizing, visible, impossible. Bone restructured. Skin became fur. The human form dissolved into something else. Not werewolves, exactly. Something different. Something that carried both humanity and mystery. Something that was the expression of their bloodline's inheritance, making itself manifest.

The mercenaries, for the first time in their coordinated elimination campaign, faced something they could not calculate. They responded with gunfire. The rounds struck the transformed survivors, and blood erupted, but the creatures kept moving. Kept advancing. One of the operatives was taken down with casual violence. The others broke formation and retreated, for the first time showing confusion and fear.

"We're not just hunted," Elina whispered to herself. "We're capable of hunting, too."

The cultists came next, an hour later. They emerged from the forest chanting, their ritual language carried on the wind like prayer. They wore symbols, marks that predated Christianity, pagan tattoos, and carved insignia. They saw the survivors with wonder and recognition.

"The blood heirs," one of them shouted. "The descendants of the lord. Come to reclaim your inheritance."

They were not hostile. They were reverent. They moved toward the survivors with hands raised, with words of blessing, with the absolute certainty that the survivors were something sacred.

"Get away from us," Magdalena hissed, her voice still carrying the rasp of the transformation she had undergone.

"We are your congregation," the cultist leader said. "We have preserved the old knowledge. The blood tradition. The pre-Christian power that your ancestor carried. Now you understand. Now you can assume your rightful place."

Elina felt the weight of it, the centuries of suppressed knowledge, the old religions persisting beneath the surface of modern Latvia, the belief systems that the occupation had buried but not destroyed. The cultists saw them as vessels of ancient power.

"We don't want this," she said.

"You don't understand yet," the cultist replied. "But you will. Once you reach the manor. Once you see the archive. Once you understand what was taken from us and what was created in compensation."

They let the cultists pass. They could not waste energy on conflict with those who were not actively trying to kill them. The mercenaries would come again, evolved in their tactics. But the cultists would wait. The cultists believed in the inevitable unfolding of a prophecy.

The werewolves came at dusk.

They emerged from the deeper forest, not as a pack but as individuals. Actual werewolves, transformed and predatory. But when they saw the survivors, particularly the three who had undergone transformation, they did not attack immediately.

Instead, one of them shifted back to human form. A man, muscular, scarred, with eyes that held intelligence and something like kinship.

"Blooded Ones," he said, addressing the group. "You're late to understanding what you are."

"Who are you?" Thomas demanded.

"I'm like you. My grandmother was one of the women he impregnated. I carry the inheritance differently than you do. The wolf comes to me fully transformed. The hunt is predatory. But we're somehow kin, you and I. More than humans are kin to either of us."

"Leonid Suduva," Elina said. The name emerged from her without conscious decision. She knew it somehow. It lived in her cells, in the genetic memory that had been expressing itself over five days of flight and transformation.

"Yes," the werewolf agreed. "The nobleman. The one who became something else. The one who passed on his transformation to the women he used. The one who accidentally created us all."

"The cultists serve him," another of the survivors said, a woman named Ilze. "The mercenaries are being paid to eliminate us. And you. What do you want?"

"To let you know you're not alone," the werewolf said. "To let you know that what's waking up in you is real. And to warn you that the mansion is not a reliable sanctuary. It's a milestone, or a waypoint. What happens when you arrive, the revelation, the choice that comes when everything changes."

He shifted back to wolf form, and the pack departed into the forest, leaving the survivors alone with the gathering darkness and the knowledge that they were not simply being hunted. They were being hunted for several reasons. They were being pressured toward understanding.

Chapter 10: The Threshold

The mansion appeared on the eighth day, as they emerged from the forest onto the grounds they had fled from five days previous. The beauty of it was stunning, the afternoon light catching the stone in ways that made the structure seem almost architectural, almost impossible.

The survivors approached cautiously. They had learned not to trust aesthetics. The gardens were beautiful, but beneath the beauty was the evidence of systematic design. The paths were beautiful, but they were clearly designed to guide movement in specific directions.

The front gate was open. Inviting.

"It's a trap," Thomas said, though with less conviction than before.

"We know," Elina replied. "But we have to go through it anyway."

They approached the entrance together, the nine of them: Elina, Lukas, Dārta, Magdalena, Thomas, Ieva, Alexei, Ilze, and Darius. The doors were unlocked. The entrance courtyard was empty. The only evidence of the breach was the carefully cleared glass on the ground, swept into neat piles as if the destruction had been cleaned up in anticipation of their return.

Inside, the manor was different from their original arrival. The luxury was still present, but it had been overlaid with something else. The library doors stood open. Shelves were visible. And a woman was waiting in the central hall, exactly where she had stood during the breach.

Daina. The keeper.

"I am glad you survived," she said. "I was not certain you would. The mercenaries are competent, and the cultists are numerous. But you carry old blood. You carry an inheritance that makes you difficult to kill."

"You orchestrated this," Elina said. It was not a question.

"I prepared it," Daina replied. "I invited you here knowing that the three forces would pursue you. I prepared the breach knowing that it would scatter you. I allowed the hunt, knowing that it would awaken what lives in your genetics. And now you have returned, and you understand, even if you cannot articulate what you understand."

"We're descendants of Leonid Suduva," one of the others said.

"Yes, and more!" Daina replied. "You carry his transformation in your blood. His genetics. His inheritance of power came from darkness, violation, and supernatural metamorphosis. You are descended from occupation-era impregnation. You carry both the trauma of violation and the power of Nosferatu ancestry."

She gestured toward the library doors.

"The archive is open. Come. I will show you what your bloodline contains."

Chapter 11: The Archive Opens

The archive was not what Elina had expected. She had imagined something sinister, perhaps. Something hidden or shadowed. Instead, it was a room filled with modern lights, large windows opening onto the courtyard, walls lined with careful documentation, a table in the center bearing genealogical charts and photographs, and records spanning decades.

Daina did not dramatize the revelation. She simply began to place documents into their hands.

Birth records. Genealogical charts. Photographs of the women. Testimony from survivors of the occupation. Medical documentation. Genetic analysis. Scientific speculation about the nature of their inheritance.

Birth Record, dated March 1942. Mother: Anna Kalnins, age 14. Father: noted as "nobleman, local proprietor." Birth weight: 4.2 kg. Observations: unusual pigmentation in eyes (golden); unusual olfactory sensitivity.

Testimony of Ilga Gruntaine, recorded 1995: My mother was fourteen when the soldiers came. He chose us. The nobleman, Suduva. We never understood why. I learned to understand only when I was older and began to recognize the blood surging in myself that she had sensed.

Scientific Documentation, DNA Analysis: All subjects share specific genetic markers that appear in no other known human population. The marker may represent vestigial Nosferatu genetics, inherited from Leonid Suduva at his transformation.

Elina read through the documents with the careful attention of someone processing information that should have seemed impossible but felt inevitable. The genetic science was clear. They carried markers that did not exist in normal human populations. The historical documentation was also clear; they were descended from women impregnated during the occupation by a nobleman who had transformed into something other than human.

"He was not evil," Daina said, watching them absorb the information. "Or if he was, the evil was contextual. He was a man of his time, shaped by his circumstances. The occupation was chaos. He exercised power over those without protection. Unknown or known to him, the supernatural inheritance passed into the genetic material he had already distributed. His children, and their children, and their children, inherited not just his human genetics but the dormant capacity of his bloodline."

"Vampire genetics," Magdalena said slowly.

"Vestigial vampire," Daina corrected. "The inheritance is real, but its expression varies. Some of you will transform more fully. Some of you will carry the capacity but never express it. All of you have heightened sensory acuity, increased strength, and the capacity for extended survival under stress. All of you can smell blood in ways normal humans cannot. All of you dream of inherited memories that predate your birth."

"This is madness," Thomas said. But he was holding a genetic chart that clearly showed the markers, the inheritance patterns, the mathematical certainty of descent from a single source.

"It is an inheritance," Daina replied. "Which is another word for madness when it involves the impossible made biological."

She showed them more. The history of Leonid Suduva, from archival records and folklore. The man was born in 1898. He had been a nobleman with intellectual curiosity about pre-Christian Latvian tradition. He had collected texts on blood magic and vampire mythology. He had read widely in European occultism. And then, in 1943, something had happened—the records were deliberately vague, but the transformation was clear. The man had ceased to be human. The vampire had emerged.

Whether the transformation was psychological or biological, whether it was real or constructed through belief and ritual, the documentation did not specify. But the genetic consequences were absolute. The bloodline carried his transformation. It was expressed in heightened senses, in capacity for rapid healing, in dreams of inherited violence, in the capacity to transform under stress into something more than human.

"What he became," Daina said, "was not simple evil. It was not simple corruption. It was a transformation. And transformation is genetic. It passes down. It persists even when suppressed through occupation, through cultural displacement, through the attempt to destroy the old knowledge and replace it with modern rationality."

She showed them the genealogies. The map of inheritance tracing from Leonid Suduva through multiple generations, branching into the twentieth-century diaspora as the survivors' ancestors fled Latvia, spread across Europe, attempted to distance themselves from the occupation and the violence and the supernatural legacy.

But genetics could not be escaped. Inheritance lived in the body. It expressed itself in dreams. It is called across generations, drawing descendants back toward the source.

"Why bring us here?" Ilze asked. "Why orchestrate the hunt? Why not simply send letters? Why not just reveal the truth without violence?"

"Because," Daina said carefully, "you would not have believed it without experiencing it. You would not have accepted your own capacity without having it tested. You would not have understood the power of your inheritance without having felt pursued by forces attempting to suppress it or control it."

She paused, her aged face showing something like compassion.

"The hunt was necessary for awakening. The breach was necessary for scattering you into isolation, where you would begin to transform. The appearance of the mercenaries was necessary to force you to recognize your own capacity to resist. The werewolves were necessary to remind you that you are not unique, not alone, not the only descendants of supernatural inheritance in this territory."

"And now?" Thomas asked.

"Now, you choose," Daina replied. "Now you understand what you are. Now you decide what you will do with that knowledge and that power."

Chapter 12: The Choice

The archive room fell silent. Outside, the late afternoon light was descending toward dusk. Elina stood among the documents and photographs and genealogical charts, surrounded by the evidence of her own impossible inheritance, aware of the nine survivors standing in various states of acceptance and resistance around her.

Daina was wrapped in a dark cloud the moment the last rays of the sun were diffused by clouds. The sunlight was not yet fully absent, yet a new and dark presence swiftly moved into the room. Before the survivors could react, literally before even the fastest among them could make a decision or step forward, Daina's body was raised into the air, sucked nearly devoid of blood, and then gently laid to the ground, as if in a primitive funeral rite.

The survivors felt their blood surge, even stronger than their shared dreams ever did. Someone stronger in the bloodline had arrived!

"I apologize for my late arrival to each of you, if you consider it proper. Yet, let us not ignore Daina's final departure, for those among you who found it within their hearts to forgive her improvised and callous way to inform you about shared familial idiosyncrasies."

The stranger, while visibly working to be as cultivated and non-threatening as he could, made each of the survivors also shiver in fear. This was a real nocturnal predator, a killer of dozens of people, not merely a messenger or pizza delivery driver.

"My name is Andrei Suduva, and the flapping one you may eavesdrop commanding sentinels outside is my older brother, Yuri Suduva. Both of us are younger brothers of Leonid Suduva, who cannot afford to come out of hiding, despite the good news of at least nine of you having survived to make the most crucial choice of your lifetimes."

Andrei continued: "For those of you who wish nothing more than a chance to return to your human life, leave this behind, and live with the normalcy and sunlight of mankind, I will offer a remedy and vaccine in one. Each of you is free to choose that without repercussions or treachery from our bloodline. For those who are willing to not live like humans, the other choice is one that only our reckless experiments uncovered. We can make you fully blooded Nosferatu this very night, but that power comes at the price vampire myth often mentioned."

Looks were exchanged among the survivors, and for Thomas, Ieva, and Darius, only the first option made sense. Family ties, career ambitions, perhaps fear or disgust. Andrei handed each of them a vial filled with a fluid.

"Drink that, and you will never have to worry about your blood surging again, or any other folks detecting you as blooded. Needless to say, you will lose the benefits and also age like regular humans, once you swallow the vaccination. It is the best we could develop, as those experiments have gone quite far, and some among us call it borderline monstrous, as what the Nazi attempted during the Great Patriotic War."

Thomas, Ieva, and Darius each drank without hesitation. Soon thereafter, a driver appeared and told them that they would gladly be dropped off at a Riga hotel, and with enough money to comfortably return to their homes after some deserved rest.

For Elina, Lukas, Dārta, Magdalena, Alexei, Ilze, though, the night would become the second transformation, as Andrei and Yuri cautiously guided them through the vampiric part of the Nosferatu experiment.

At midnight, the six of them were thirsty the way only Nosferatu can be, and went outside to hunt before returning to Suduva Manor. Their new home, and the cellars and dungeon below it, would protect them from the now murderous rays of the sun.

Epilogue:

The political debate between the bats, the rats, and the sewer gators was impulsive, feral, and forthright, as only animals tend to be. The winds howling outside were barely heard, even with the sharpened senses of predators.

Family affairs, for the nights heralded a new challenge, one for which fresh bloods like Elina, Lukas, Dārta, Magdalena, Alexei, and Ilze were not yet experienced enough.

Deeper down below, a bald man literally burst out of a sarcophagus, despite having nothing of a brute about him. The bald, pale man even regretted the shattered property as a loss.

Still, the night wasn't about manners. This specific night was about the Dynasty finally formed, triumph after decades of setbacks and betrayals, and the new threat that now could undo it all, as from the hidden depths of Russia a presence made itself known: Drakulov!

The bald, pale man standing in the moonlight by now knew his fiercest adversary did not joke, but contrary to a highborn, who had failed before, the Nosferatu also knew the value of true loyalty and real family ties in contrast to brainwashed or intimidated lackeys only. He was not afraid, ready to kill or die, or both. He had done so before, yet God and Death judged it only a temporal slumber nonetheless.

THE END